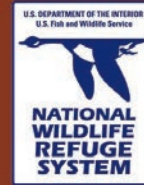


Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area Executive Summary

Polk, Osceola, Okeechobee, and Highlands Counties, Florida

August 2011



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Summary of the Draft Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment for the Proposed Establishment of the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area

Polk, Osceola, Okeechobee, and Highlands Counties, Florida



Cattlemen move a herd across their Polk County ranch along the shores of Lake Kissimmee.
Photo credit: Carlton Ward Jr / CarltonWard.com



Ken Salazar
United States Secretary of the Interior

Summary of Proposed Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area

"This initiative is aimed at preserving a rural working ranch landscape to protect and restore one of the great grassland and savanna landscapes of eastern North America."
Interior Secretary Ken Salazar

Everglades Headwaters Conservation Partnership
Working together is the key to conserving central Florida's great grasslands and prairies, the remnants of a once vast ecosystem.

At its heart, the proposed 150,000-acre Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and Conservation Area (Conservation Area) is a collaborative vision for adding the conservation pieces needed to forever protect the Kissimmee River Basin's natural resources. As such, this proposal has few peers in the National Wildlife Refuge System. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) would use a combination of refuge lands and easements to connect existing conservation lands. The goals are to create wildlife corridors, protect rare species, restore wetlands, and provide outdoor recreation, while supporting working ranches.

With this proposal, the Service is committing to long-term partnerships with local communities, landowners, ranchers, recreational users, local businesses, organizations, and the public, as well as with local, state, tribal, and federal agencies. Together, we can leave behind the best of

the Everglades headwaters for future generations to enjoy, with its abundant wildlife, clean water, and rural heritage.

Existing Conservation in the Kissimmee River Basin
The network of existing conservation lands within the Kissimmee River Basin includes state parks, state wildlife management areas, the Avon Park Air Force Range, The Nature Conservancy's Disney Wilderness Preserve, and agricultural lands.

Wildlife, Habitats, and the Conservation Need
The Kissimmee River Basin has a long history of cattle ranching, farming, and forestry. Its mosaic of sandhill and scrub, freshwater wetlands, prairies, pine flatwoods, and pastures supports iconic Florida species, including the Florida black bear, Florida panther, Florida grasshopper sparrow, and Florida scrub-jay. Hundreds of other rare species also call this area home, some of which exist nowhere else in the world.

As Florida continues to grow and develop, these natural resources and a rural

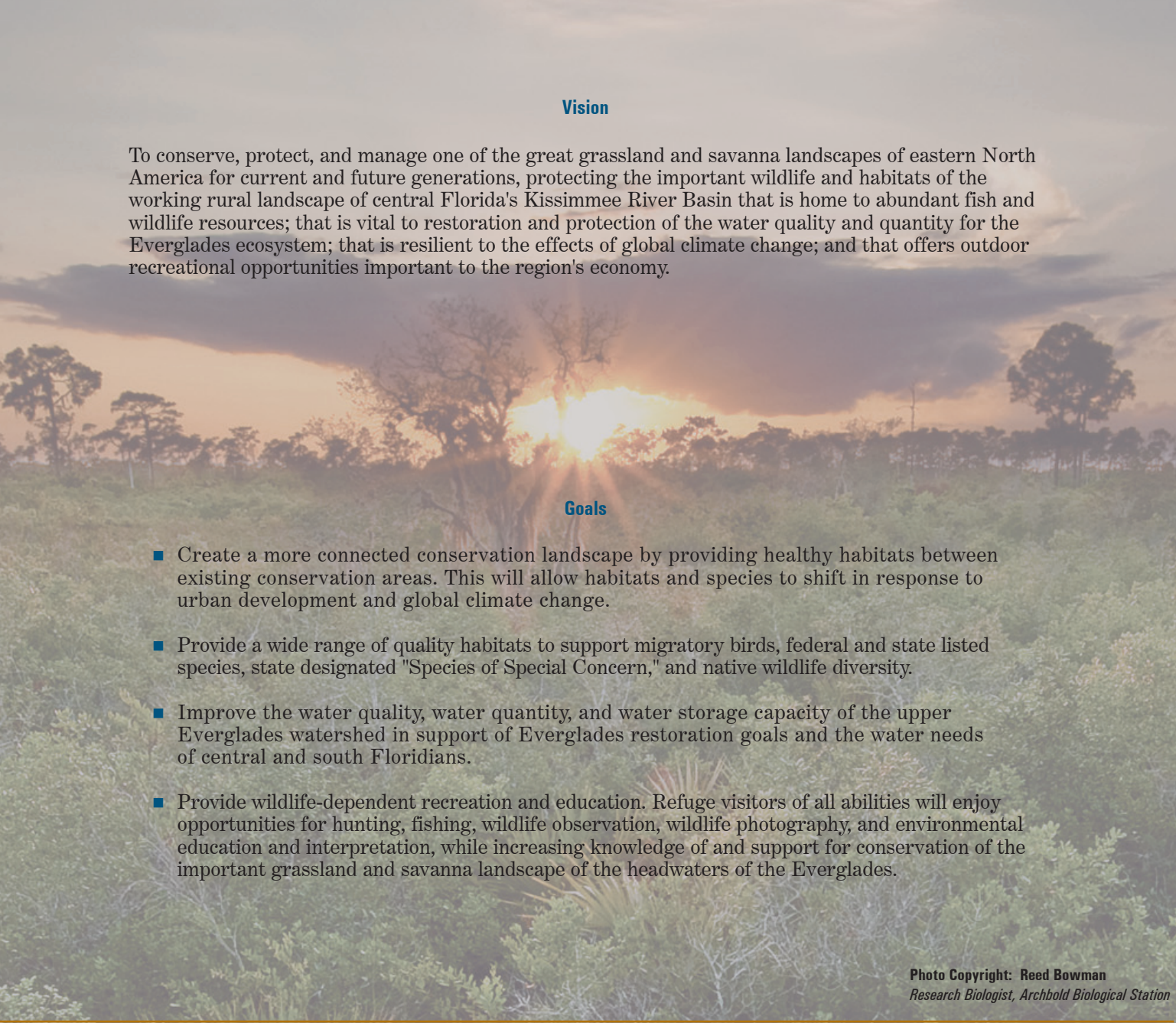


Photo credit: Carlton Ward Jr / CarltonWard.com

way of life are under pressure. The threats include water pollution, development, and fragmented habitats. As the nation's leading conservation agency for wildlife and habitat protection, the Service seeks to work with public and private land managers to create a cohesive vision for the landscape.



Photo Credit: George Wilson



Vision

To conserve, protect, and manage one of the great grassland and savanna landscapes of eastern North America for current and future generations, protecting the important wildlife and habitats of the working rural landscape of central Florida's Kissimmee River Basin that is home to abundant fish and wildlife resources; that is vital to restoration and protection of the water quality and quantity for the Everglades ecosystem; that is resilient to the effects of global climate change; and that offers outdoor recreational opportunities important to the region's economy.

Goals

- Create a more connected conservation landscape by providing healthy habitats between existing conservation areas. This will allow habitats and species to shift in response to urban development and global climate change.
- Provide a wide range of quality habitats to support migratory birds, federal and state listed species, state designated "Species of Special Concern," and native wildlife diversity.
- Improve the water quality, water quantity, and water storage capacity of the upper Everglades watershed in support of Everglades restoration goals and the water needs of central and south Floridians.
- Provide wildlife-dependent recreation and education. Refuge visitors of all abilities will enjoy opportunities for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation, while increasing knowledge of and support for conservation of the important grassland and savanna landscape of the headwaters of the Everglades.

Photo Copyright: Reed Bowman
Research Biologist, Archbold Biological Station

Draft Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment
Before the Service can buy land or interest in land, it is required to develop two documents which are shared for public review and comment. The Draft Land Protection Plan (Draft LPP) outlines the resource protection needs, presents the methods the Service could use in working with conservation partners and interested landowners to accomplish these needs, and details a layout of the lands within the Service proposal, including conservation protection priorities for the proposed Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area. The second document, the Draft Environmental Assessment (Draft EA), analyzes the anticipated impacts of the alternatives.

The Service analyzed three conservation alternatives within the Kissimmee River Basin: Alternative A (No Action Alternative, No Refuge and No Conservation Area); Alternative B (Refuge Only Approach); and Alternative C (Proposed Action, Conservation Partnership Approach).

Alternative C is the proposed action because it best meets the goals for the project. This alternative proposes to acquire from willing sellers up to 50,000 acres in fee title focus (Everglades Headwaters NWR) and up to 100,000 acres with conservation easements (Conservation Area).

Proposed Refuge
The proposed 50,000-acre Everglades Headwaters NWR could potentially be located in up to six units. The Service has identified a larger area, called the Conservation Focal Area (outlined by the blue areas on the map), within which to purchase these refuge lands. This larger area would allow the Service to respond over time to changing landowner interests and opportunities as they arise.

This is a voluntary program. Landowners within the Conservation Focal Area would be under no obligation to sell their properties to the Service.



USFWS Photo

Public uses that would occur on the proposed refuge are:

- Hunting, fishing, and hiking;
- Environmental education and interpretation;
- Wildlife observation and photography;
- Research; and
- Horseback riding.

Activities supporting these uses would also be considered, such as primitive camping and all-terrain vehicle use on existing roads and trails to support hunting access and research; and boating to support fishing access. The Service is working with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to manage any refuge lands as a state wildlife management area.



USFWS Photo

Some of the ways the Service would manage the refuge would be to:

- Provide habitat for threatened, endangered, and resident wildlife species;
- Fill wetland drainage ditches to restore historic water storage capacity;
- Provide breeding grounds for waterfowl;
- Utilize prescribed burning and allow grazing to remove excess vegetation and restore native plant communities;
- Control invasive species through manual, mechanical, and/or chemical means;
- Protect cultural and historical resources for the public to enjoy.

Proposed Conservation Area
The Service would work with willing landowners and partners on conservation programs and agreements to protect a Conservation Area of up to 100,000 acres in partial interest, such as conservation easements that prohibit development. This land would remain in private ownership, and the landowners would continue to control activities on their lands. The proposal identifies a larger area, called the Conservation Partnership Area (outlined by a dotted line on the map), within which to purchase and establish this Conservation Area.

The Conservation Area would provide important opportunities for conservation, while at the same time maintaining the ability of the ranching community to persist. Landowners in the proposed Conservation Partnership Area may voluntarily choose to participate and partici-



USFWS Photo

pating lands would remain in private ownership. Landowners within the approved Conservation Partnership Area would be under no obligation to sell interest in their properties to the Service.

Only those lands in which the Service has acquired partial interest would be subject to the terms and conditions of the easement, agreement, and other tool(s) that would be used. No other rules or restrictions would be placed on lands within the Conservation Partnership Area.

Next Steps
The Draft LPP/Draft EA is available for a 6-week public review and comment period ending on October 24, 2011. Paper and CD copies are available upon request. Also, the Draft LPP/Draft EA may be viewed and downloaded at: <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/evergladesheadwaters/>.

Comments may be submitted verbally or in writing at the public meetings; by mail to: Everglades Headwaters Proposal, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 2683, Titusville, FL 32781-2683; by e-mail to: EvergladesHeadwatersProposal@fws.gov; and by fax to: 321/861-1276.

The Service will evaluate the public comments and determine whether to move forward. If the Service does move forward, then staff will develop the Final LPP/Final EA; determine the applicability of a Finding of No Significant Impact; and, if no significant impacts are anticipated, forward the final decision to the Service Director for approval or denial.